

## HAIG, NIVELLE, AND THIRD YPRES

by Frank E. Vandiver\*

In a battle that raged from June to November, 1917, British troops under Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig advanced against German positions in Flanders. With the capture of the village of Passchendaele, the vaunted Third Battle of Ypres ended. Gains were balanced against Allied losses of nearly half a million men,<sup>1</sup> but the British commander considered his campaign a success. He had dented the powerful Hindenburg Line, had thinned German ranks by some 270,000 men, and had exhausted many of Germany's best divisions—all of which certainly constituted success. According to the relative definition of "success" in vogue on the Western Front in 1917, Haig might have been right. But if experience counted, his measure of success was challenged by an overriding question: Should he have launched Third Ypres at all? A recent biographer, John Terraine in *Ordeal of Victory* (1963), considers the campaign vital and suggests that it reflects Haig's study of the war. Did he study the war? Did it teach him anything?<sup>2</sup>

Experience should be the constant tutor of generals. War in France and Belgium was rich in experience, most of it new and hectic. Gone were "the good old days" of Empire Wars. The uncomplicated tactics Haig had seen at Omdurman, in the South African campaigns, in India's myriad combats, had given way to the digging, dredging, and engineering that made the Western Front the epitome of modern warfare. First attempts at maneuver and open war had come to grief on the Marne; the "race to the sea" ended mass movements for inexplicable reasons. Divisions of horse had been herded to France for the day of the expected "breakthrough"—but the day never came. All of which bewildered such traditional cavalry officers as Haig. War was now a siege spread across almost four hundred miles of Europe.

Sieges were studied by all officers; staff colleges and military academies offered courses in the mechanics of entrenchment, the intricacies of regular

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approaches as expounded by Vauban; in theory, all trained commanders knew how to reduce Acre, Troy, perhaps even Carcassonne. But the siege lingering from the Channel Ports to Switzerland was different. Few fortified towns were handy; instead, the lines ran along open ground and were often several systems deep. Such old defensive reliables as Greek fire and hot oil had given way to labyrinthine trenches festooned with great sweeps of barbed wire. So the nature of things had changed. How could the enemy's lines be broken so completely that the waiting cavalry might at last have room to range behind the battle, cut communications, spread terror, and disrupt logistical support to the front?

Answers were sought with remarkable dedication by Allied and Central Powers generals. Answers were offered at the Marne, at Verdun, the Somme. The most pointed answer was offered in April, 1917, along the Aisne, when the offensive ordered by French General Robert George Nivelle failed. What happened to Nivelle, Haig knew with special clarity—he had been a party to the Frenchman's plan.<sup>3</sup> Did he apply any of the lessons taught by Nivelle's experience when he plotted Third Ypres?

Almost from the moment Haig took command of the British Expeditionary Force, he cast covetous eyes toward the strip of Belgian coastline in enemy hands. In January, 1916, he talked with Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, commanding the Channel Fleet, and was impressed by the need to free Ostend and Zeebrugge. Loss of the channel coast would deny German submarines splendid operating locations.<sup>4</sup> The more Haig thought about the Belgian front, the more fetching it became. What if British forces landed behind the German lines? Not only might the ports be freed, but the whole German right flank might be rolled back. With any luck, the war might be pushed to a finish by the BEF.

Even General Joseph Joffre, the stolid French commander, saw the virtues of channel operations and seems to have offered tentative support to a British campaign aimed at clearing Belgium.<sup>5</sup> But German attacks at Verdun disrupted Haig's and Joffre's hopes.<sup>6</sup> Verdun became the test of France's endurance. Endless divisions were consumed in that cauldron of attrition. Pressure mounted steadily until, at last, Joffre was forced to plan a diversionary offensive. He looked to Haig's army for help. The British joined in the Somme campaign—a long series of battles that wasted French and British soldiers in frightful numbers and achieved some slight relief of Verdun.

Be it said for Haig and Joffre that losses damped their ardor not a bit. Out of the continual grinding came a kind of faith in grinding—process became an end in itself. And there was always a haunting possibility in the background: relaxed pressure might give the Germans victory.

By the end of 1916, Allied strategy in France and Belgium was affected by two major considerations: 1) the tottering state of Russia, and 2) British

successes in Mesopotamia. If Russia collapsed (which seemed likely), fresh German divisions could speed westward and shift the balance of strength on the Western Front. This shift could be made more decisive if the "easterners" among Allied planners persuaded London and Paris that the war might be won more economically in the Middle East.

Cynical as it may sound, Haig and Joffre needed to commit their governments to the Western Front by entangling them in another lengthy offensive. At an Allied conference in November, 1916, Joffre proposed a bald policy of "wearing down" the enemy during the coming year. He concluded that Allied numerical superiority should be used while it lasted, and urged a general push along the whole battlefield.<sup>7</sup> But these plans were victims of a French government crisis in December which resulted in Joffre's replacement by General Nivelle.

Nivelle's quick rise from obscurity seemed justified by his spectacularly successful counterattacks at Verdun. He claimed no magical powers, only that he had a "new plan" for quick victory. This plan, based on extensive artillery preparation and an "army of maneuver" in reserve, would at last produce the cherished "breakthrough" and win the war. The French government greeted his promises of speed with glee and accepted his proposed battle. First, though, he had to convince the British.<sup>8</sup>

Nivelle had panache, a jaunty, Gallic poise, dressed well, wore a very French moustache, looked roguish and daring, and spoke English like a native. To London he journeyed and presented his plan to the War Cabinet in mid-January, 1917. He charmed everyone. His proposal might have been depressing—it sounded as though he wanted to resume the Somme battle on tougher ground along the Chemin des Dames ridge—but he was persuasive, talked of smashing German defenses and of rushing through the gap to cut off retreat. It would all be done in twenty-four to forty-eight hours, or Nivelle would stop the fight. This proposed attack along the Aisne depended on a preliminary British assault at Arras to draw in enemy reserves; once the British attracted the Germans, a massive French drive would start, supported by the army of maneuver's twenty-seven divisions. When the front broke, these twenty-seven divisions would exploit the opportunity.<sup>9</sup> Intense artillery preparation would obliterate or cripple opposing trenches and troops before the French infantry charged—success was certain! Beguiled by the vision of quick victory, the British Cabinet rushed to agree.<sup>10</sup>

So desperately did Britain's leaders desire success in haste that Lloyd George, recently elevated to the post of Prime Minister, suggested putting Haig's army under Nivelle's command.<sup>11</sup> Swift complaint from Haig and General Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, halted this outrage, but Haig did accept a subordinate role in the coming

operations. He may well have sought a subordinate role, for he had an eye to the future.

Nivelle's plans, although deftly presented and initially glittering, tarnished under scrutiny. As French and British staff officers digested the scheme, obvious questions arose. What was the strategic objective? Victory is always the ultimate objective, but some finite measure of initial success was needed. Why attack against the most formidable of the enemy's defense systems? The naturally strong chalk bluffs of the Chemin des Dames were made stronger by elaborate trenches, forests of wire, and countless machine guns. Nivelle explained that crushing the finest enemy positions would ruin German morale.<sup>12</sup>

The dapper general's best argument for his plan was that it had an obvious local purpose—to pinch off the huge Noyon salient which bulged between Arras and Soissons. British troops driving in from Arras to meet French troops coming up from Soissons would cut off thousands of Germans and eliminate a major part of the enemy's strongest front line. But the possibility of an Allied drive on the salient had long disturbed the German high command. In February, 1917, German leaders took a bold step and began evacuating the salient. Eventually enemy troops yielded almost twenty miles of French soil in a retreat famed for unprecedented destruction. Short of sowing salt in the earth, the Germans did everything possible to devastate the French countryside.<sup>13</sup>

Once the Germans gave up the salient, Nivelle's offensive lost even local justification. But Nivelle rationalized grandly. German withdrawal helped him, he said, by contracting the front to be attacked and so permitting further concentration of French troops.<sup>14</sup> A kind of hysterical certainty possessed Nivelle—nothing could swerve him from his battle.

Easter Monday in Flanders dawned cold, sleet-ridden, and gray. The British First Army lay entrenched opposite Vimy Ridge, that sodden wrinkle of land so long beyond Allied grasp; the Fifth Army, commanded by General Edmund Allenby, was entombed beneath the streets of Arras—at least a good portion of it was huddled in a labyrinth of dug-outs and caves under the town and beyond it. These underground warrens were connected to the front line by communication tunnels; troops moving up through them were protected from enemy shells. Allenby's men attacked at 5:30 AM, and by the end of the day had advanced almost three and a half miles and taken over six thousand prisoners. First Army men did their part by taking Vimy Ridge. Haig noted that "our casualties are estimated at 16,000. This is small considering the three successive strong positions, each one deeply wired, which have been taken."<sup>15</sup>

In a few days British momentum waned in face of stiffening resistance. Haig finally called off the battle on April 14, but only for regrouping.<sup>16</sup>

He was committed to aiding Nivelle and hence to keeping up pressure on the Arras front while the French got ready to advance.

Nivelle was having trouble getting his offensive going. Delays, frustrations, alarms, shortages, mud, all forced postponement of the drive. At last, on April 16, French infantry scrambled out of the trenches and marched forward into sheets of rain, sleet, and bullets. The Germans were ready for them—full information about the attack came from various sources and made possible preparation of a virtually impregnable front line. The assault failed from the start. Nivelle's forty-eight hours passed without a breakthrough anywhere. Two days of fighting brought 120,000 French casualties.<sup>17</sup> Repulsed along the whole of his front, Nivelle gave way to panic—the drive went on! Wave after wave of *poilus* dashed against the enemy's works until, finally, Nivelle ordered an end to the slaughter.<sup>18</sup>

Such abject failure brought despair to France. Damage to the army's morale struck deeper than anyone guessed. Disillusionment stalked the ranks; the cynical acceptance of Nivelle's senseless plan by the politicians seemed the final betrayal of the soldiers. Mutiny began in the colonial divisions and spread to include some of the elite troops. In wake of dissension, French offensive spirit vanished. Nivelle was replaced on May 15 by General Henri Petain, who visited mutinous divisions and counselled a new program—France would wait for the Americans. This was about the first sensible suggestion many *poilus* had heard from any of their generals.<sup>19</sup> But the suggestion found no sympathy at British headquarters.

Haig's concern was not for the wreckage of French hopes but for the success of the BEF. The time had now come, he believed, to press the Flanders offensive. He had never abandoned his project of clearing the Belgian ports and unhinging the German right flank. But this undertaking would require a *quid pro quo* from the French. Nivelle had, midst the certainty of success, agreed that if his attack failed he would cooperate with the Flanders venture. Now that he was gone, would Petain honor the agreement? Haig had his doubts<sup>20</sup>; French promises were scarcely to be trusted! Even if the French failed to assist with diversionary attacks in Champagne and other sectors, Haig was convinced the British must carry on. He put his view plainly to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff: "In my opinion the decision to cease offensive operations now . . . would be most unwise. . . . I consider that the prospects of success this year are distinctly good if we do not relax our efforts and that it would be unwise, unsound, and probably, in the long run, most costly in men and money to cease offensive operations at an early date."<sup>21</sup>

The British government pondered. What should be done? Was there some new path to success at an acceptable cost in men? Another Aisne or Somme could not be tolerated, much less justified. What choice was available? Haig and Robertson had answers. Both urged continued attacks

because only through relentless pressure could the enemy be exhausted. There were no short cuts—attrition was the only sure system of victory. Robertson expounded this novel idea persuasively: "The best plan seems to me to go back to one of the old principles, that of defeating the enemy's army."<sup>22</sup> Haig put this philosophy forcefully in a memorandum for the General Staff and Cabinet: "The guiding principles on which my general scheme of action is based are those which have proved successful in war from time immemorial, viz., that the first step must always be to wear down the enemy's power of resistance until he is so weakened that he will be unable to withstand a decisive blow; then to deliver the decisive blow; and, finally, to reap the fruits of victory."<sup>23</sup> These guiding precepts would be put into effect by continuing the Arras fighting for several weeks, then, after an expected Italian offensive began to draw off some enemy strength, Haig's army would start the Flanders drive.

There hardly seemed much new in these ideas of the CIGS and Commanding General, BEF. They suggested another Somme, another Aisne. Had the top British command learned nothing from the war, especially from Nivelle's debacle? A close look at the ideas outlined by Haig and Robertson shows that they believed they had learned one truth from Nivelle's experience—the "breakthrough" was a casualty of balanced forces and defenses in depth. Nivelle had erred in dash. Modern weapons and trench systems prompted Robertson to observe that "at one time audacity and determination to push on regardless of loss were the predominating factors, but that was before the days of machine guns and other modern equipment. . . . It is no longer a question of aiming at breaking through the enemy's front. . . . It is now a question of wearing down and exhausting the enemy's resistance. . . ."<sup>24</sup> Haig echoed these sentiments. Nivelle's experience was useful in turning attention back to military verities: "Our action must . . . continue . . . to be of a wearing down character."<sup>25</sup> This hardly sounded like the Haig who, a scant few months earlier, had promised the people of England that in 1917 "we shall break the German front completely."<sup>26</sup>

Haig's and Robertson's assurances notwithstanding, Lloyd George, the War Cabinet, French ministers, all greeted the proposed Flanders offensive with misgiving. What could an attack against heavy German positions near Ypres gain when the Arras fighting had been so inconclusive? Lord Hankey, who shared the deliberations of the War Cabinet, confessed that no one believed in Haig's plan or thought much save carnage would result. But Haig appeared before the members and had a mesmeric effect when he argued for his battle. Not tall but straight, he had Edwardian elegance and looked like a general's general. Cool and poised and handsome—graying hair and moustache lent strength to a face unmarked by doubt—he had the hauteur and force of the righteous. British troops, he boasted, were



at the finest edge in morale and experience; the Germans were beginning to tire. One more drive in Flanders would finish the enemy; but a period of relaxation, a lull induced by sending men to far corners of the war, would revive German spirit and stamina. Haig wanted permission to wear the enemy out in Flanders. He got it. "Lloyd George felt he could not press his amateur opinions and over-rule him," Lord Hankey said, "and Haig was authorized to continue his preparations" for the first phase of his attack—the capture of Messines Ridge.<sup>27</sup>

Haig's plans and preparations should measure his military vision. Especially in view of Nivelle's recent experiences, they should reflect Haig's enlarged appreciation of problems of war on the Western Front. They do.

At 3:10 AM, June 7, 1917, nineteen deep-sunk mines erupted under German positions along Messines Ridge. No sooner did the mud ebb than it heaved again under a barrage of 2330 guns; behind the barrage came 80,000 Tommies of the Second Army. In three hours Messines Ridge—that scourging eminence which, since 1914, had dominated British lines in southern Flanders—was captured, along with 7,500 prisoners and sixty-seven guns. British casualties amounted to about 17,000 men.<sup>28</sup> In the euphoric aftermath of this splashy success, Haig asked approval to proceed with the rest of the Battle of Third Ypres.

The request was a formality. He anticipated no trouble in winning final acceptance of a plan already approved in principle. But Lloyd George and the War Cabinet had grown increasingly skeptical about success in Flanders; the Prime Minister toyed still with intrigues for reinforcing Italy at the expense of Haig's legions. The general frothed in frustration, but at last received the government's assent.

On July 31, the main phase of Third Ypres began. It was all heroic and awfully traditional. Division after division drove out from Ypres toward the town of Passchendaele, remote and important only as a dim objective. Waves of Tommies spilled across the Flanders ridges, gained some measureless fen, died, and were replaced by comrades whose courage triumphed over hope. Month upon necrotic month the British oozed through mud and wire, lost half a million men,<sup>29</sup> and earned, in the end, five miles of churned slime and the draggled village of Passchendaele.

That sodden strip with its lost hamlet was the fruit of "wearing down"; it was a soiled token of persistence and so would have a touch of glory. But that woeful quag in Flanders told another tale of attrition, a tale of quenched intelligence. It stood stark testimony to Douglas Haig's splendid isolation. He learned nothing from the fate of his colleagues, and even the disaster that engulfed his ally, Nivelle, left him untutored. The Aisne, like the Marne, Verdun, the Somme, taught him no new theories or techniques, not even the potential of waiting. All this experience, this shared

sacrifice, left his prejudices unjolted, his certainties intact. Third Ypres shows Haig at his best—a Bourbon on the battlefield.

## NOTES

1. Leon Wolff, *In Flanders Fields: The 1917 Campaign* (New York, 1958), pp. 259–260, discusses the confusing statistics of killed and wounded.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 259. For some critical comment on Haig's campaign, see Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command, 1914–1918* (London, 1961), pp. 681–682. For the official British account of the Third Ypres battle, see Cyril B. Falls and others, *Military Operations in France and Belgium, 1917* (2 vols. and appendix, London, 1940, 1948), II.

3. See Gen. Robert Nivelle to Haig (received 11 Sept. 1917); Haig to Nivelle, 12 Sept. 1917, in Haig Papers, Box H 117, in National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

4. Robert Blake, ed., *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig, 1914–1919* (London, 1952), p. 120.

5. Hankey, *Supreme Command*, p. 677.

6. Blake, *Private Papers of Haig*, pp. 132–135.

7. See John Terraine, *Ordeal of Victory* (Philadelphia and New York, 1963), pp. 187–188, 243; Blake, *Private Papers of Haig*, p. 134.

8. Alexandre Ribot, *Lettres à un ami, Souvenirs de ma vie politique* (Paris, 1924), pp. 174–177.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 175–176; Wolff, *Flanders*, pp. 43–44; Terraine, *Ordeal*, pp. 246–255.

10. See Wolff's description of the visit in *Flanders*, p. 44, and also Victor Bonham-Carter, *The Strategy of Victory, 1914–1918* (New York, 1963), pp. 208–209.

11. The dispute over command arrangements is amply covered in Bonham-Carter, *Strategy*, pp. 212–223.

12. Wolff, *Flanders*, pp. 56–61.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 56–57.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 59; Bonham-Carter, *Strategy*, pp. 223–226; Terraine, *Ordeal*, pp. 276–280; Gen. Sir Archibald Wavell, *Allenby: A Study in Greatness* (London, 1940), pp. 175–176; Duff Cooper, *Haig* (2 vols., London, 1936), II, 80–81. For details of the German withdrawal, see Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The British Campaign in France and Flanders, 1917* (London, 1919), pp. 7–16.

15. Blake, *Private Papers of Haig*, p. 216.

16. Wavell, *Allenby*, pp. 180–181.

17. Wolff, *Flanders*, p. 64.

18. Four days after the French first attacked, General William Robertson passed judgment on Nivelle's failure in a letter to Haig: "Nivelle's prophecy of doing the trick in 24 to 48 hours and then pushing up a lot of other divisions was always to my mind most ridiculous and I could never understand why he should have made such a statement. . . . It was a very silly theory for him to have advanced and he seems to have entirely wasted the lessons of the last two years and a half." Robertson to Haig, 20 April 1917 in Haig Papers, Box H 112. See also Bonham-Carter, *Strategy*, pp. 234–235.



19. Wolff, *Flanders*, pp. 67–68.

20. See his OAD 428, “The Present Situation and Future Plans,” 1 May 1917 (“Secret”), in Haig Papers, Box H 113.

21. Haig to Chief of the Imperial General Staff, 19 April 1917 (“Secret”), in Haig Papers, Box H 112.

22. Robertson to Haig, 20 April 1917, in Haig Papers, Box H 112.

23. OAD 428, “The Present Situation and Future Plans,” 1 May 1917.

24. Robertson to Haig, 20 April 1917.

25. OAD 428, “The Present Situation and Future Plans,” 1 May 1917.

26. Quoted in Wolff, *Flanders*, p. 50.

27. Hankey, *Supreme Command*, pp. 681–684.

28. Terraine, *Ordeal*, pp. 314–315.

29. See Wolff, *Flanders*, pp. 259–260.